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The future global agenda for children — imperatives for the twenty-first century

Summary

The present report outlines the UNICEF secretariat's preliminary recommendations for a future global agenda for children and the focus of UNICEF beyond 2000. These proposals build on the progress for children since 1990. They draw on lessons learned in the course of the decade and recommend actions to address some of the formidable challenges that require urgent collective action.

The report argues that there is already broad consensus on many of the issues that negatively influence human development. Most are persistent problems, but they are compounded by new concerns such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic, sharply declining official development assistance, rising national debt among poor countries, an unfettered global economy that is creating both unprecedented wealth and growing disparities, and increasing instability and conflict in many countries.

However, the report also reasons that major new progress in human development is possible within a single generation, if the global community will commit to three key outcomes for children.

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I. Introduction

1. The UNICEF Executive Board and the UNICEF secretariat share a long tradition of seminal work for children. In 1990, this partnership paved the way for the first ever World Summit for Children and facilitated the elaboration of the World Declaration and Plan of Action for children. It also gave impetus to the successful campaign for universal ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Two notable Executive Board decisions — 1989/5 (E/ICEF/1989/12) and 1990/2 (E/ICEF/1990/13) — set the stage for the global effort to attain specific goals for children by 2000.

2. On the eve of the new century, it is again time to assess progress for children, re-examine global development priorities and consider what legacy this generation is leaving for those yet to be born. The focus for UNICEF is appropriately on what still needs to be done to significantly improve the situation of children and contribute to the full realization of their rights.

3. The present report outlines the secretariat's preliminary recommendations for a future global agenda for children and the focus of UNICEF beyond 2000. These proposals build on the progress for children since 1990, drawing on lessons learned in the course of the decade and recommending actions to address some of the formidable challenges that require urgent collective action.

4. This report argues that there is already broad consensus on many of the issues that negatively influence human development. Most are persistent problems, but they are compounded by new concerns such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic, sharply declining official development assistance (ODA), rising national debt among poor countries, an unfettered global economy that is creating both unprecedented wealth and growing disparities, and increasing instability and conflict in many countries.

5. The report also reasons, however, that major new progress in human development is possible within a single generation, if the global community will commit to three key outcomes for children.

II. Lessons of the 1990s: new opportunities and future challenges

6. As studied and extensively documented in the 1990s, it is now clear that societies which manage to "get it right" for children are the ones that make major strides in human development. These are the societies that understand the importance of investing in children's health and education and the need to respect their dignity, and that see these imperatives as overarching national priorities. Such countries seize the unique opportunities of infancy and childhood to change the trajectory of human development in their countries by protecting the well-being of children and women and by making good quality basic education — the most fundamental determinant of future well-being — available for all children without discrimination.

7. UNICEF has long argued that the quality of life for women and children is the foundation for the success of all human endeavours. There is now an impressive body of data and scientific evidence which has established that it is possible to decisively change the course of human development for the better by shifting national investments to favour children's survival, protection and development. Based on this, the world may finally be ready to embrace this knowledge and to act on it.

8. By their very complexity, many of the obstacles to human development defy sector-focused strategies alone. Development partners will be called upon in the new century to forge broad new alliances by reaching beyond traditional sectors and governmental structures to include, as equally important partners, people's movements, community-based organizations, the mass media and others who share the concern for human progress. By applying universally-recognized principles of human rights through development strategies, it is time to rethink how human situations are analysed and understood, how poverty and violence are transmitted between generations, and why discrimination and poor human development are still so inextricably linked in so many countries, despite economic progress.

A. Progress since 1990

9. Progress during the 1990s since the World Summit for Children has been impressive. Among the achievements is the significant new reality that children in 191 countries live in States that have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and 161 countries have agreed to respect standards set in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. This means that women and children in virtually all countries can make legitimate claims on their societies. In addition, the focused efforts of the 1980s and 1990s to eliminate diseases such as polio and to reduce readily preventable infant and child deaths have been remarkably successful. The data at the end of the decade will tell a story of significant progress in a relatively short period

and of many promises kept to children. These remarkable achievements include the fact that:

(a) Polio is on the verge of eradication;

(b) Deaths due to measles have been reduced by 65 per cent globally;

(c) Deaths from neonatal tetanus are down by more than one quarter;

(d) Some 12 million children no longer risk mental retardation due to iodine deficiency in their diet;

(e) It is possible that guinea worm will be eliminated before 2000;

(f) Blindness due to vitamin A deficiency has been reduced significantly;

(g) More children are in school today than at any time previously;

(h) Some 71 per cent of people have access to clean water — an increase of more than 10 per cent since 1990;

(i) Issues such as child labour, the sale and trafficking of children, child prostitution, gender-based violence and child soldiers are now more widely acknowledged as violations of children's rights and widespread problems, and there is growing political will to address them.

B. Future challenges

10. Despite such progress, however, major obstacles to human development persist, and many of them are very basic to peoples lives and well-being. Thus:

(a) Some 12 million children under five years old still die annually of readily preventable causes. Of this number, 8 million are deaths before 12 months of age, and two thirds occur in the neonatal period (the first month of life);

(b) For every neonatal death, another child is born with a physical disability, and 22 million newborns each year weigh less than 2,500 grams. These infants have a death rate 5 to 30 times higher than normal weight babies and exhibit increased risk of disability;

(c) Malaria during pregnancy, associated with low-birth weight, accounts for approximately 5–10 per cent of infant deaths;

(d) Malnutrition still retards the physical and mental development of some 160 million children;

(e) An estimated 250 million children below the age of 15 years, and many below the age of 10, are engaged in child labour;

(f) The number of school-age children who currently have no access to primary education is estimated to be 130 million, and girls are still the vast majority;

(g) Basic sanitation is still unknown to more than 3 billion people (more than one half of humanity);

(h) Childbirth is still a life-threatening event for millions of women, and an estimated 585,000 die needlessly due to related causes.

11. The escalating HIV/AIDS pandemic in many parts of the world has added a new burden for millions of people. If current trends continue, child survival and life expectancy gains of recent decades will be reversed in several countries, most of them in sub-Saharan Africa. New infections are occurring at the rate of 5.8 million per year, of which about 50 per cent are among children and youth aged 10–24 years. It is projected that by 2000, in 23 seriously affected countries, 19 of which are in Africa, the total number of orphans from all causes (including HIV/AIDS, war, famine, maternal deaths and other diseases) may exceed 24 million.

12. Although the size of the global economy today is counted in trillions of dollars, the combined sales of the world's top 200 companies are larger than the combined economies of 182 countries. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has also recently issued the bleakest report ever on ODA trends, noting a 21 per cent overall decline in ODA between 1992 and 1997 (*Development Cooperation Report* 1998). For the poorest countries, the drop has been sharpest and the inequities even more alarming.

C. The key lessons

13. The new agenda for the future must draw on development lessons of the 1990s. It must promote the concept of respect for the dignity and equality of all people, and especially, it must redress the historical discrimination that has faced women and girls for no reason but that of gender. It must be characterized by courage to tackle both the immediate and underlying causes of problems that face poor communities. Cultures of violence and exploitation must be challenged. The multiple reasons why education systems fail millions of poor children and the various forms of discrimination that prevent all children equally from realizing their full potential must be exposed and addressed. Above all, the new agenda must focus on breaking the

poverty cycle that for so many people has passed from generation to generation.

14. This will require far greater attention in the future to the needs of millions of poor families who cannot care for and protect their children. The human development goals of the future will not be reached if families are unable to nurture children and create positive learning experiences for them. The accident of a family's status cannot be allowed to determine a child's development path. Complementary short- and longer-term development goals and strategies in the future must, therefore, focus on providing the safety nets that will enable poor children to pull themselves out of poverty through access to care and protection, health services, good quality learning opportunities and participation in community life.

15. The decade of the 1990s has shown that global goals can provide powerful spurs to action as well as important benchmarks for measuring progress. The pursuit of quantifiable targets must not compromise efforts to build sustainable systems and local capacity. Another important lesson is that attention to underlying and structural causes of problems is necessary to ensure that short-terms gains are not easily reversed. UNICEF has learned that success takes time and sustained effort. There are no easy shortcuts to lasting social change, but remarkable progress is possible when Governments commit themselves to the realization of children's rights.

16. For UNICEF, a global commitment to sustainable human development means an agreement to make child survival, protection and development the cornerstone for future progress. For this to occur, however, major changes in several areas of development planning and prioritizing will be necessary. Such changes should be guided by the norms and standards established by the two Conventions and by the remarkable consensus on the necessary conditions for progress that the global development conferences of the 1990s have forged.

D. Creating the enabling environment

17. Concerted and renewed efforts are, therefore, necessary to sustain past progress and make significant new breakthroughs possible for children during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Governments and the international community must work to create an enabling environment that will include efforts to:

(a) Strengthen and secure the capacity of States to play their role as the effective protector of children's and women's rights, including by ensuring access to basic social services and a standard of living adequate for children and families to meet their basic needs. This should also include attention to fiscal and budgetary policies;

(b) Strengthen partnerships between States and civil society organizations that foster the best interests of children, and promote the use of resources in an efficient, accountable and collaborative way;

(c) Ensure that girls and boys are encouraged from the earliest age to respect each other's inherent dignity and equality, and that societies make every effort to remove the obstacles to women's equal status, empowerment and full participation in all aspects of community life;

(d) Ensure that education and learning processes help to form both human capital for economic growth and social capital for tolerance, respect for others and the right of each individual to participate with equality within family, community and economic life;

(e) Encourage the participation and self-expression of children, especially adolescents, in the contexts of family, school and community life; and make concerted efforts to end civil and cross-border wars around the world and to challenge the culture of violence that threatens to destroy family and community life in so many countries.

III. Elements of a global agenda for children

A. Building on the legacy of the past

18. As the new millennium approaches, there is a yearning for a bold new vision and a search for effective approaches that will make dramatic progress possible. The global development conferences, the OECD/Development Assistance Committee agreement on goals for the future and the widely ratified human rights treaties are a rich legacy of the 1990s. They provide both the normative and operational frameworks for the future. However, identifying the critical entry points that will unleash major transformations remains a key challenge.

19. UNICEF believes that the choice of new goals must continue to reflect the understanding that there are inherent links between the survival, development and general well-being of children, and the realization of women's rights. This understanding has created unique and fundamentally

transforming opportunities to refocus future development priorities on responding to the basic needs and unrealized aspirations of millions of disinherited women as well as on the realization of children's rights.

20. While further discussions and broad consultations are needed, UNICEF believes that several key aspects of a renewed human development agenda are already quite clear. Priorities must be informed by the abundant scientific evidence that critical human development opportunities occur early in a human life, and once missed are almost irretrievable. Global action is necessary to ensure that social policy decisions are guided by this knowledge and that the appropriate human development investments are made when the chance to positively influence the course of human development is greatest.

B. Responding to opportunities for human development

21. UNICEF proposes that the international community and national Governments should make a global pact to work assiduously in the next decade towards the universal realization of the three significant outcomes for children. This commitment would necessarily require Governments and the global network of cooperating agencies to commit to strategic new goals that focus on overcoming the circumstances that currently make these results for children difficult to achieve.

22. UNICEF proposes these three outcomes for children because within them lies the key to breaking persistent cycles of poverty. They call for significant changes in the allocation of public sector investments, the political will and renewed efforts to resolve conflicts, combat HIV/AIDS, overcome discrimination and violence and to help poor families, and especially women, to care for and protect their children.

23. UNICEF believes that these outcomes are possible because the knowledge, resources and strategies are available in today's world. Therefore, the organization will call for leadership at all levels to realize this bold vision for human development and for children, and for national Governments and international organizations to commit to making this possible.

24. The three priority outcomes for children are:

(a) Infants start life healthy and young children are nurtured in a caring environment that enables them to be physically healthy, mentally alert, emotionally secure, socially competent and intellectually able to learn;

(b) All children, including the poorest and most disadvantaged, have access to and complete basic education of good quality;

(c) Adolescents have opportunities to fully develop their individual capacities in safe and enabling environments and are helped to participate and contribute to their societies.

25. Pregnancy, infancy and early childhood are among the most critical periods for human development. However, in spite of the real progress for women and children in the 1990s, the share of national and international development resources allocated to ensure safe motherhood and child development still suggests that this knowledge is little known or poorly applied in development policy and planning. The continuing high rates of maternal mortality, the insignificant progress in reducing perinatal and neonatal deaths or low birth weight in so many developing countries, the incidence of preventable disability, high rates of maternal and child malnutrition, and excessive failure and drop-out rates in the first grades of primary school are some of the stark indicators of missed opportunities to overcome wasted human potential by investing in comprehensive programmes for early childhood care and development.

26. The long-standing commitment to ensure that good quality basic education is universally accessible to all children must finally be taken seriously in all countries in the twenty-first century and must become an overriding priority for the next decade. Millions of poor children, most of them girls, still lack access to a classroom, and thus are unable to share the joy of discovery through education and to uncover and develop their inherent talents. Millions of others fail because schools are not stimulating or because poor children enter school too nutritionally depleted, too traumatized by violence in their homes and communities or too overworked to learn.

27. Among the most disadvantaged are the children trapped in acute poverty, combined with exposure to dangerous and exploitative circumstances beyond their control. Millions of orphans in sub-Saharan Africa, disabled children with unmet needs, those conscripted as soldiers, child prostitutes, child brides or child workers, and those unsettled by conflict and economic meltdown constitute the vast majority of children out of school today. These children will almost certainly face the added risks of early parenthood, HIV/AIDS and juvenile crime. They will almost never close the earning gap between themselves and their educated peers, and almost certainly, they will pass on their poverty to their own children. Poorly funded, rigid and traditional approaches to schooling will not make basic education rapidly available to these children. Therefore, the

new century demands bold new initiatives in basic education.

28. Adolescence, which the above group also reflects, is another time of critical transition in human development. Increasingly this age group is at the forefront of societal concern because of extremely high school drop-out rates, early marriage and early child-bearing, violence, drug addiction, HIV/AIDS or alienation from the political process of their countries. These are some indications and outcomes of the increasing marginalization of teenagers. These problems tend to shape the responses to adolescents and overshadow the overwhelmingly positive contributions they make. Through their creativity, energetic acceptance of challenges, contributions to social change and help to younger siblings, often as heads of households, adolescents are a positive force and an untapped resource in all communities.

29. Because many adolescents, both married and unmarried, are parents at very early ages, with their children at greatest risk of death, disability and abuse, there is growing appreciation of the intergenerational impact that adolescent behaviour exerts on future human development and community life. In addition, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has focused attention on the challenges faced by this age group as well as on the need for societies to consciously plan for their health, participation and development.

IV. The future focus of the work of UNICEF

30. While UNICEF will still emphasize the importance of protecting children from various forms of preventable death, the future UNICEF agenda will go beyond survival. It will place early childhood care and development and equal access to good quality basic education as the global centrepiece of its programme strategy to reduce poverty and realize the rights of children. On a more selective basis, the organization will support specific programmes for adolescents, especially focused on preventing HIV/AIDS and developing their skills to cope with life's challenges.

31. UNICEF work in the future will also be enhanced by greater attention to maternal health and nutrition, safe motherhood and the cognitive and psychosocial development of young children. This more integrated approach to the development of young children will create a sounder basis for investments in primary education. Greater programmatic emphasis will also be placed on involving poor families in the search for solutions and on strengthening community-based strategies for child care and development and basic education.

32. Working closely with other partners and within the context of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), UNICEF will engage national partners in dialogue to help shape policies and national priorities, giving emphasis to: meeting the basic needs of the poorest; protecting the rights of women and children; and placing children's protection, survival and development at the centre of national development efforts.

33. Broad-based partnerships and convergent sectoral initiatives will be supported to facilitate better integration of programmatic elements needed for children to survive, grow and develop optimally. With partners such as the World Bank and the regional development banks, the World Health Organization, the United Nations Population Fund and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, as well as non-governmental organizations, UNICEF will work to make child development more widely understood as a prerequisite for the success of basic education strategies and a subject requiring far greater attention from Governments for overall human development.

34. UNICEF will also focus on galvanizing political will and securing a commitment to global social action that will fundamentally change the way the international community assumes its responsibility towards children. The wavering commitments to the two Conventions in many developing and industrialized countries and declining resources for development are trends that must be reversed. UNICEF and the United Nations system must work to convince national Governments and the international community that investing in children's well-being and protecting their rights are the surest way to regain momentum for human development, to build cohesive societies and to make a quantum leap in positive social change within one generation.

35. In the coming months, UNICEF will be discussing its specific contributions to the future global agenda for children with a wide range of partners, especially with its UNDAF partners. Technical consultations will be undertaken with development researchers and practitioners in different regions, as well as with experts in children's issues, to further elaborate and validate the proposed strategies for implementing this agenda and for assessing future progress. UNICEF will focus on enhancing the organization's technical competence in each of the priority areas identified and further define specific results for which UNICEF will hold itself accountable.

36. The next medium-term plan, covering the period of 2000–2003, will be presented to the Executive Board in 2000. It will contain recommendations for Executive Board approval on specific actions to be undertaken by UNICEF in the context of a new global agenda for children.

V. The next steps

37. In the coming months, UNICEF will engage in broad consultation on both the proposed global agenda for children beyond 2000 and the UNICEF contribution. Members of the Executive Board, United Nations agencies and Governments will be engaged in a dialogue on the strategies, roles and commitments needed to move forward. The process of defining this agenda more fully will provide opportunities to forge a broad coalition of leaders for children, leading to events planned for 2001 to celebrate achievements and launch the new agenda for children.

38. A special session of the General Assembly is planned in 2001 to examine the results of a decade of action for children following the World Summit for Children. In addition to this special session, UNICEF will mobilize leaders from Government, community and civil society organizations, the private sector, special ambassadors and child leaders around the proposed new international agenda for children.

39. The purpose of this mobilization is to generate new momentum and political commitment to human development goals, giving priority attention to children. The process of mobilization for this alliance at national and regional levels will be as important as an eventual global event. The Executive Director has begun consultations with the six original initiators of the World Summit and other development leaders on the content and emphasis of this process, and will seek the guidance of the Executive Board as these ideas evolve.